Electronic messaging

Buses display new AU technology

Auburn students riding Tiger Transit buses last week were the first in the nation to view a new wireless communication system invented by students and faculty in AU’s Samuel Ginn College of Engineering.

The visible technology is new but not unique: Message boards facing the passengers in each bus continuously scroll information about campus events and activities, changes in schedules and other campus news. What riders do not see, however, is the breakthrough by which AU keeps the information up to date.

Although a few transit systems around the world use light-emitting-diode (LED) message boards to scroll messages to riders, developers of AU’s system say Tiger Transit is the first to use wireless technology with software to update all the message boards instantly and simultaneously.

A major advantage of the new technology is the ability to transmit messages quickly to large numbers of students when timing is critical, said Richard Chapman, leader of the team that developed the technology. With previous technology, someone would have the time-consuming task of going from bus to bus to put the message on each.

“One a day-to-day basis, this new technology provides an efficient way to convey information, but the (See Messaging, page 2)

AU rises in publication’s annual rankings

U.S. News & World Report magazine has ranked Auburn 42nd among the nation’s top public universities in its rankings for 2004-05 — up two spots from a year ago.

This is the 12th consecutive year that AU has been ranked among the nation’s top 50 public universities by U.S. News & World Report.

The magazine ranked the University of California-Berkeley as the nation’s top public university.

“These rankings are the most recent indicator of Auburn University’s outstanding academic quality,” said interim President Ed Richardson. “Auburn is continually improving the quality of education it provides its students and, with everyone working together — students, faculty and staff, administration, trustees and alumni — we can make this a great university.”

The book, America’s Best Colleges, which also contains the rankings, goes on sale Tuesday. Many of the rankings and some of the articles from the book are in the current issue of the newsmagazine. (See Rankings, page 2)
AU professor develops software to aid admissions officers seeking diversity

Software developed by an Auburn professor has been touted by The Chronicle of Higher Education and other publications as a promising tool in maintaining diversity in college student enrollment.

The Applications Quest software is the subject of a lawsuit by the U.S. Department of Justice that reflects the staff’s judgment about how much weight to assign each measure. According to Gilbert, an assistant professor in the Department of Computer Science and Software Engineering who invented the software, "Our agreement restricts identifying the institutions participating in the pilot study," said Juan Gilbert, an assistant professor in the Department of Computer Science and Software Engineering who invented the software.

Gilbert began work on the software following the 2003 Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action in student admissions. Although the ruling allows considerations for minorities in the admissions process, it requires a complete review of every application before considering race.

However, Gilbert said the ruling is not clear about how this review should be accomplished, and many institutions are therefore ignoring race altogether.

Addressing that problem, Applications Quest provides a complete review of applicants by comparing all of the data provided, including race, academic performance, gender and family economic background, Gilbert said.

Much more robust than standard statistical analysis software that enables largely numeric comparisons and analysis, Applications Quest groups applicants into clusters of similarly qualified students with similar backgrounds, he added.

The new software also enables the comparison of numerous applicants at once, something that humans cannot do, he noted. Gilbert said this feature presents a way to more equitably compare applicants. Race then becomes only one of many important factors to consider, he said.

Grant funds study of ties between tax structures, natural resources in South

An Auburn forestry researcher has received a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant to study tax structures across the South and their relationship to sustainability of natural resources.

"We're trying to see if this has anything do with the defeated plan." He said the study is also important for policy makers who need information about the potential impact of any proposed property tax change on forest or agricultural land.

"The property tax issue is a very highly debated issue. It is very relevant to public policy makers as well as the general public," he said.

Zhang said he became interested in the project through his involvement with the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences’ Center for Forest Sustainability, where he is looking at integrated modeling, including changes in and factors that affect land use.

To establish its rankings U.S. News categories colleges and universities primarily by mission and, in some cases, region. The magazine then gathers data from each institution on up to 15 indicators of academic excellence, assigning each factor a weight that reflects the magazine’s judgment about how much each measure matters.

Indicators the U.S. News staff uses to interpret academic quality fall into seven categories: academic reputation among its peers, retention of students, faculty resources, student selectivity, financial resources, alumni giving and (for national universities and liberal arts colleges) the graduation rate per full-time equivalent.

During the next three years, Zhang will collect data that will enable him to study the impact of urbanization, public policy and market forces on land use in the South.

Zhang noted that the region's population is increasing faster than the national average. And, he added, forestry and agriculture are important to the Southern economy and public wellbeing.

"Along with that, you have urbanization. As people get more affluent, they are moving to the suburbs to bigger lots, which impact forestry and agricultural operators," Zhang said. "In the meantime, the market – prices and costs – changes so you have the market effect."

Zhang will conduct an intensive study of the influence of taxation on land use. "It is an important issue that nobody has studied in significant detail yet because it is so labor intensive," he said.

"The property tax issue is a very highly debated issue. It is very relevant to public policy makers as well as the general public," he said.
Renovation under way on conference center in final stage of hotel upgrade

Dixon Conference Center is getting a new look this fall in the third and final phase of a three-year renovation of the university-owned hotel and conference center.

The conference center makeover includes upgrades to the lighting and computer services for rooms as well as new ceiling tiles, carpet, paint and wall coverings.

Alvin Bettcher, director of sales and marketing for the hotel and conference center, said the renovation will make the facility more appealing and serviceable to persons attending conferences, seminars, lectures, luncheons and banquets. The conference center changes will be consistent with the new decor in the hotel, he added.

Not all the changes will be visible. Among the unseen changes will be an upgrade in computing capabilities to provide better service for wireless computers.

Bettcher said Dixon Conference Center is being upgraded in two stages this fall. Most of the renovation will be complete within a few days, before the conference center enters its busy fall schedule. Then, in late November or early December, as the season winds down, the renovation will resume with work continuing into the following spring.

Bettcher said the renovations have improved the overall quality of the facility for guests and will enable the management team and the college to establish the hotel and conference center as a national model for teaching in the hospitality industry.

AU turned management of the hotel and conference center over to the West Paces Group of Atlanta in 2003. That group is headed by Horst Schulze, a founder of the prestigious Ritz-Carlton hotel chain, and other former Ritz-Carlton executives who are working with the College of Human Sciences to integrate the hotel’s management into the college’s instructional program.

Bettcher said the renovations have improved the overall quality of the facility for guests and will enable the management team and the college to establish the hotel and conference center as a national model for teaching in the hospitality industry. With the scheduled completion of work in the conference center, the focus will be on quality services and instruction, he said, adding, “We are all looking forward to completing the renovations and having a period of normalcy.”

Three faculty appointed to positions at Biggio

AU’s Biggio Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning has named three professors as faculty fellow associate directors. They are Bill Buskist of Psychology, Don Mulvaney of Animal Science and Isabelle Thompson of English.

Faculty fellow associate directors participate in campus-wide faculty development efforts and serve as speakers and mentors in Biggio Center programs and seminars. James E. Groccia is director.